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ABSTRACT

As part of the Atlanta Public School System, the Downtown Learning Center (DLC) uses personalized learning contracts to thwart potential dropouts and classroom troublemakers. Voluntary admission, screening by a student/staff committee, and parental approval precede the general agreement which details school attendance and work commitments. In addition to developing non-traditional learning programs, the staff members assume administrative tasks. Although the student is not confined to courses within the DLC, he must negotiate a contract with a teacher for each course. The contracts specify requirements for credit, allow for substitutions and renegotiation, and obligate the instructor to provide the necessary instruction and materials. Since contracts are written with passing letter grades or credit, there are no failing grades, just uncompleted work. The DLC encourages personal growth and acceptance of responsibility in addition to academic progress as exemplified in the sample social studies contracts presented in this profile. Four general conditions prefacing all social studies contracts and other examples of contracts in political behavior, Georgia cultures, and psychology are provided. The DLC places those who are unable to cope with the program in other schools or jobs. Originally short term placements were envisioned, but most students remain at the DLC until graduation or vocational placement.
 (Author/EC)

DOWNTOWN LEARNING CENTER

profiles of promise 31

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by

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ERIC/CHES

PROFILES OF PROMISE are descriptive brochures that highlight innovative social studies and social education practices, which teachers and administrators can easily adapt to their own classrooms or schools.

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"Through ten years of elementary and secondary school I was told what was good, what to do, how and when to do it. Why I should do it was generally vague if the 'why' of something came up at all. Generally, I felt the students worked either to avoid punishment or to achieve good grades. I did it mostly to be left alone..."

"I wanted to learn--I'm sure of that. But it was dull, really boring. I have never felt the least interest in the distillation of wood, but we spent over a week doing that experiment. That was four years ago. I have never even heard about the distillation of wood except within that classroom, and I cannot recall anything about it, except that it was boring..."

In 1971 the Downtown Learning Center (D.L.C.) in Atlanta, Georgia, opened its doors to accept students like the writer of the above statement. From its first ten to its present 160 students, the Center has served young men and women who have been unsuccessful in traditional school programs--recent or potential dropouts, students performing far below everyone's expectations, classroom troublemakers. To varying degrees all students who attend that Center have been alienated by school; by any standards, they are a "difficult" group.

When the Downtown Learning Center was first funded, the Atlanta Board of Education charged the staff with two responsibilities: (1) to develop a personalized instruction program to meet the needs of "turned off" high school students and (2) to develop a prototype program that would be exportable to, or could at least influence, traditional schools in Atlanta. D.L.C. was to serve students in grades 8 through 12.

The D.L.C. staff developed a program to meet these goals which is essentially guidance-intensive. Students are actively involved in decision making, have little chance of failure, and operate with minimally essential restrictions. All instruction is individualized, with learning contracts as the main instructional mode. In a "school without walls" approach, D.L.C. students do as much learning outside the Center as they do in. Flexibility and free choice are the key motivational elements.

INSIDE D.L.C.

The Downtown Learning Center is located near the heart of the city in Atlanta's oldest school building. Since D.L.C. is an ancillary to 28 middle, junior, and senior high schools, it is important that it be centrally located and accessible to a majority of Atlanta's students. Community agencies and resources in the downtown area are also easily available to D.L.C. students.

Some of the structure of the Atlanta Public School system is maintained at D.L.C. The school operates on the same quarter schedule as other schools, and student attendance and course completion records are kept in the same manner. Funding for the center comes exclusively from the Atlanta Public School system; in three years of operation, the D.L.C. cost-per-pupil has been less than the school system's average.

Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of the D.L.C. is the absence of traditional classes. At D.L.C. there are neither bells nor class schedules. Instead of familiar classrooms, there are instruction labs in language, math, science, social science, art, music, physical fitness, and business. Students may spend as long as they wish in the labs, where teachers are available for help.

Admission to D.L.C. is voluntary and must be initiated by the individual student, who completes an application form indicating his reasons for wishing to come to D.L.C. The applicant is immediately scheduled for an interview with some of the members of the Center's Review Board, a rotating, self-perpetuating group consisting of four students and three staff members. Acceptance is contingent on approval by the Review Board and the student's parents. Nearly all students are of high school age with only an occasional, older returnee.

When a student is accepted, one of the staff members is assigned by the Review Board to act as that student's adviser. An adviser serves as a combination counselor, record-keeper, friend, and conscience. After an adviser is assigned, the student signs the General Agreement, a statement of mutual expectations, agreed to by the student, the student's parents, and the student's adviser. The student also negotiates a Quarterly Agreement which details attendance and school work commitments. Since D.L.C. students technically stay on the rolls of their home schools, pertinent attendance and course completion data are submitted to the home school for permanent recording. High school graduation is not an assumed goal for every D.L.C. student, but if an enrollee does choose to work for a diploma, he must complete the usual state and district requirements for graduation.

In order to insure adequate time to plan and prepare, the D.L.C. staff has set the enrollment ceiling at 200 for 1974-75. The students represent a wide range of socioeconomic and academic backgrounds. At present the racial distribution is approximately 52% White and 48% Black; the staff is consciously working to increase Black enrollment, since Atlanta's population is 80% Black. Although the Center has a constant waiting list, there are not as many Black as White applicants.

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D.L.C. has a staff of 14--11 full-time teachers, a librarian, secretary, and program administrator; everyone on the staff teaches, and everyone does some administration. In addition, there are usually three or four volunteers, recruited from service organizations, who work with students on a part-time basis.

Most teachers at D.L.C. are there because they want to teach in the kind of program offered by the Center. They either apply on their own initiative or are sought out by the D.L.C. staff. Teachers are given almost total freedom in curriculum and methods; but along with the freedom comes considerably more responsibility than is normally assumed by the traditional teacher. Hilton Smith, program administrator, summarizes staff expectations by saying, "The D.L.C. is a place for teachers who are resourceful, and inventive, and determined; it is not a place for shirkers, lounge rats, or even 8-to-3 clock punchers."

LEARNING BY CONTRACT

All learning at D.L.C. is done on an individual contract basis. A new student is introduced to a catalogue listing the 867 courses available in the Atlanta High School curriculum, from which he may choose his courses. The D.L.C. staff teaches a wide variety of courses, with teachers branching out of their academic fields into areas of special interest to them. If a student wishes to take a course which cannot be offered at D.L.C. either for lack of personnel or proper facilities, the staff arranges for the student to take the course elsewhere. An academic course such as oceanography might be taken at another high school or a local college; a vocational course such as auto mechanics might be completed at a private garage.

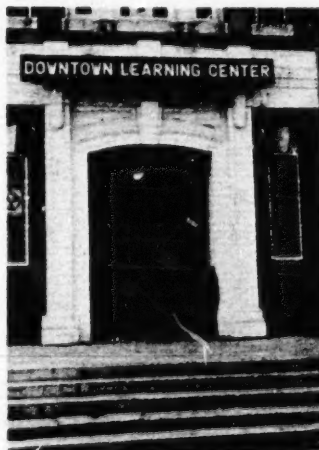
When a student decides which course he wishes to take, he contacts the appropriate teachers and negotiates a separate contract for each course. Smith describes the contracts as follows: "Most of our contracts are personalized--structured in accordance with the student's abilities and aspirations; however, we do have some 'instant' contracts that are very structured, affording security for students who are not immediately comfortable with contract negotiations." Although most contracts are individualized, there are some group contracts for special projects; most contracts are written; a few are verbal. A full load for a student is considered about five contracts per quarter, but there is considerable flexibility.

Few contracts call for the exclusive use of a textbook, as teachers encourage students to use a variety of sources in their studies. Many contracts require students to get away from the campus and into the city to use community agencies and citizens as resources. Students have studied in hospitals, the zoo, newspaper offices, the Memorial Arts Center, Georgia State University, the Y.M.C.A., courthouse offices, public libraries, and many private businesses which agree to take students for on-the-job training.

SOCIAL STUDIES CONTRACT

Developing a curriculum based on individual contracts has not been easy. Smith writes that after three years contracts are still "primitive, though much improved" from the first quarter. In social studies, four general conditions preface all contracts.

1. When you have attained the objectives listed below, you will receive credit for the course.
2. You may renegotiate the contract at any time.



Entrance to D.L.C.

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May Day activities held by students on school grounds



Guerilla theater workshop

3. Games, simulations, discussions, and other may be substituted for some of the objects.
4. The instructor's obligation is to provide necessary for the student to attain the objectives.

As shown in the examples which follow, beyond contracts are highly individualized. The specific depending on the nature of the work outlined and the student involved. Some contracts require high student contracts vary from highly academic to completely practical. Smith believes it is important to know something about negotiated. Below are short biographical sketches of contracts negotiated with each.

Contract in Political Behavior

Larry H., Black, loud show of bravado as over a sharp sense of humor; street-wise; in discussions of political processes. He does not read well but points of view on issues. The following contract was negotiated in 1972 Presidential primaries and conventions:

1. After a discussion on the political process, the student will bring in material from the political behavior.
2. The student will know five major candidates for election and their racial attitudes.
3. The student will bring in material from the political behavior.
4. In a role-playing situation, the student will act as another student for President of the United States.
5. The student will participate in political behavior.
6. Evaluation: The student will accomplish 80% of the objectives.

Contract in Georgia Culture

Mark J., White, from authoritarian Jehovah's Witnesses; in his immature relations with others; plays a lot of conflicts of strict moral code and relatively swiftness he seems to be a dutiful student, but not very is first of three in Georgia history and is required to follow:

- The student will:
1. Study human behavior, as influenced by physical and cultural factors.
 2. Study cross-cultural interaction and cultural change.
 3. Know the concept of culture and be able to identify a particular cultural influence.

Outdoor Living field trip:
parachute found on the beach



...s, and other specifically scheduled activities
the objectives.
to provide materials, guidance, and instruction
tain the objectives.
low, beyond the general conditions noted above,
he specific requirements of contracts differ,
lined and the abilities and interests of the
re high student input, others almost none; com-
pletely practical. To best understand a contract,
something about the student with whom it was
al sketches of two students and excerpts from

Political Behavior

...ado as overlay for insecurity; quick mind and
discussions shows an interest in, and ignorance
lead we'll but is not shy about discussing his
g contract was negotiated by Larry during the
ions:
tical process, the student will know the defi-
or candidates for the upcoming Presidential
tudes.
rial from the newspaper each day, related to
he student will engage in a campaign against
of the United States.
n political field trips.
accomplish 85% of all above items.

Georgia Cultures

...Jehovah's Witness family; a typical 8th grader
plays a lot; at times is a brat; reflects inner
tively swinging code of peer groups. In discus-
but not very discerning or curious. This course
d is required. Mark's contract for Georgia cul-

...enced by physical and social environmental factors.
on and cultural differences.
d be able to generalize human behavior as related
ence.

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4. Use Changing Culture--Georgia Culture, loaned from lab.
5. Participate in field trips and projects directed by instructor.
6. Meet with instructor daily at 8:30.
7. Make a scrapbook showing cultural traits of Black, White, and Indian cultures.

For the student who has difficulty making the transition from a traditional to a contracting system, D.L.C. teachers have developed contracts that are structured in a step-by-step manner. An example of an "instant" contract can be seen in these lessons from a psychology contract.

Contract in Psychology

- #19: The next few lessons deal with schizophrenia... Read "Stating the Issue," page 187. Then view very carefully Filmstrip 6, using the guide. Then read "A Schizophrenic Child," pp. 188-194. Think through the answers to the questions on page 188.
- #20: Read "What We Know About Schizophrenia," pp. 194-201. Make a list of questions you would like to ask a psychologist or psychiatrist about schizophrenia. Turn in for evaluation.
- #21: Listen to the tape of "A Psychotherapeutic Interview." In listening to the tape, try to catch the behaviors that would indicate that the boy is schizophrenic. Then read "Treating Schizophrenics," pp. 201-206. Write a short essay as to why schizophrenia is hard to treat.

Within the next year, D.L.C. plans to develop a series of core modules for the social studies program. Each module will emphasize a basic skill such as map reading, logic, or the inquiry approach--skills needed in many social studies courses. The core modules will represent one or two hour contracts, and the staff anticipates they will be used by many students.

The freedom and individuality of the contract approach is a vast change for students coming from traditional schools. It is equally as great a change for teachers. In describing what it is like to be a teacher in the program, Smith has written, "... (D.L.C. is) not having three lessons to plan for tomorrow but having 100 contracts, plus or minus a few, to watch. Not having an assemblage of bored faces to look at, but a variety of individual faces and moods to relate to... Sometimes I feel like a blotter trying to cope with 80 spills."

WHAT IS PASSING?

Student achievement at D.L.C. is measured by two standards. Academic progress is accounted for by the measures built into each contract. When a student has completed the terms of the contract, he receives a "pass" mark and five quarter hours of credit. If a student wants a letter grade, the contract is written so that a grade of A, B, or C is awarded. There is no failing grade, just uncompleted work. As one student expresses it, "This school teaches that no one is a failure; everyone is good at something, even if it's just smiling."

Playing game designed and built by students to demonstrate the thrills and risks of possessing "pot"

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Beyond the academic progress made by a student, teachers also evaluate, more subjectively, the human progress shown by the student's improved self-image and restored self-confidence. Smith feels the staff's first job is to help the student "get in touch with himself," to find out where his interests and abilities lie. As a student takes responsibility for his own curriculum decisions and timetables, he begins to grow in self-confidence. Students also come to understand and care about each other through simulation games, camping expeditions, and open staff meetings. "D.L.C. teaches you to accept other people, and to accept yourself," in the opinion of another student.

Do all students "make it" at D.L.C.? Unfortunately not. Even with the supportive atmosphere of the Center, some students simply are not able to cope with school. Smith cautiously suggests the reason for many D.L.C. failures is that "...those students really didn't want to go to school badly enough to handle the freedom."

When it becomes clear that a student isn't succeeding at D.L.C., the young man or woman is asked to meet with a Review Board to chart a new course. If the student is young, the group might encourage him to go back to his old school. Older students may elect to go to a vocational center, the Job Corp, or a regular job. The D.L.C. staff acts as a broker in securing such placements. At the end of three years operation (June 1974), the D.L.C. had accepted 445 students; only 64 students completely dropped out of school during that entire period. Many graduated or passed the diploma equivalency exam; others went on to jobs or other educational programs.

When D.L.C. opened, the staff viewed it as a type of educational halfway house where students would come for a time to get on the right track educationally. The teachers expected that after a year or so students would elect to return to their home schools. It has not turned out that way. Most students have come to D.L.C. and stayed until they graduated or went on to vocational placements. The staff now realizes that, for many students, the D.L.C. atmosphere is necessary not only to "get it together," but also to "keep it together."

ONE STUDENT'S REACTION

Being part of D.L.C. means something different for each student. Every individual handles the challenge and responsibility in his own way. Yet there are some experiences which seem to be shared by many D.L.C. students. The following account, written by a student, describes some of the experiences and feelings common to a number of young people who have attended D.L.C.

Students who come to the D.L.C. experience different levels of learning attainment... The first phase is the freedom phase... You are bombarded with devising your own structure... (then) there is the testing... The students test the structure, the rulers, curriculum, or anything to see if it's real... After you are at the D.L.C. for some time you begin to tire of testing everything. You gradually begin to take an interest in learning in the academic areas... You gather tools along with your experiences, tools like responsibility, and relating to others... A reality of all these phases is that not each individual fits into them. Many students get stuck in some stages. Some, for instance, get stuck in the freedom stage. They stay there because they've never been able to indulge, so they hold onto it. But for some students getting into a phase, any phase, is the most progressive, positive experience in any educational environment.

ERIC DOCUMENTS

- ED 088 385: A GUIDE TO WRITING LEARNING CONTRACTS. 10 pp. MF: \$.75, HC: \$1.50. This guide presents the framework for writing a learning contract and the problems inherent in the development of such contracts. The contract specifies the learning activities to be undertaken, the duration of the study, the criteria by which the work is to be evaluated, and the amount of credit to be assigned.
- ED 088 179: DIRECTORY OF OPTIONAL ALTERNATIVE PUBLIC SCHOOLS. 20 pp. MF: \$.75, HC: \$1.50. Also available from Changing Schools, School of Education, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana 47401 (Order #008, \$1.00, Quantity Discounts). This document contains a directory of 464 alternative public schools, by state, including the school name, address, grade levels, and enrollment. An alternative school is defined as any school within a community that (1) provides alternative learning experiences to the conventional school programs, and (2) is available by choice to every family at no extra cost.
- ED 083 715: ALTERNATIVE PATHS TO THE HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA. 61 pp. MF: \$.65, HC: Available from the National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1904 Association Drive, Reston, Va. 22091 (\$2.00, Quantity Discounts). The authors propose a complete redesign to provide nontraditional means for achieving a high school diploma, drawing on the resources of local school authorities.
- ED 081 692: ALTERNATIVES: STRATEGIES AND STUMBLING BLOCKS. 60 pp. MF: \$.75, HC: \$1.15. This report on alternative educational programs presents an overview of some current theories and proposals for educational reform as background to the description of development of three alternative schools in Toronto.

For further information:

WRITE:

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Downtown Learning Center
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Atlanta, Georgia 30313

READ:

"Alternative Schools: Agents for Change?"
By Barbara Capron, Stanley Kleiman, and Tedd Levy. SSEC Newsletter, No. 13, May 1972.
Single copies available free from SSEC,
855 Broadway, Boulder, Colorado 80302.

Free Schools. By Jonathan Kozol. Boston:
Houghton-Mifflin Co., 1972.

Free/Open Schools. By Nicholas Helburn. SSEC
Publication #154. 35 pp., mimeo (1973) \$1.15.

Raspberry Exercises: How to Start Your Own
School and Make a Book. By Sally Raspberry
and Robert Greenway. Freestone, California:
Freestone Publishing Company, 1971

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